



## **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NOTHINGNESS AND FREEDOM BY JEAN-PAUL SARTRE**

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### **Abstract**

The beginning of this paper is an attempt to provide an analysis and understanding of the notion of Nothingness as perceived and conceived by Jean-Paul Sartre in his magnum opus "Being and Nothingness". Furthermore, the study endeavours to understand Sartre's method of bad faith in relation to his concepts of facticity and transcendence by engaging the theory of freedom. More specifically, I would first locate the notions of nothingness; later facticity and transcendence. Then, I would make an attempt to provide a brief outline of his method of bad faith in relation to facticity and transcendence by employing the theory of freedom. I hope to make clear certain key terms of Sartre like nothingness, negatite, bad faith, transcendence, facticity and authenticity as the paper proceeds towards its stated aim. Here I would be referring to his book "Being and Nothingness".

**Keywords:** Nothingness, Consciousness, Negatite, Bad Faith, Givenness, Facticity, Transcendence.

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## **1. Introduction**

As a phenomenologist, Sartre is concerned with looking at lived experiences of human existence with new perspective and in this context he seeks to explain and unravel the phenomenon of absence or nothingness as arising from the very being of human reality. For this purpose, he studies human conduct not as mere psychological states but as consciousness, of and towards the world and this analysis is expected to reveal the experience of nothingness and its relation with being. As he stated that “the permanent possibility of non-being outside and within, condition our question about the being.”

Sartre feels that previous approaches to nothingness treat the notion as a mere void or empty concept and explain away the concreteness of nothingness. Accordingly, he begins by elaborating upon how concrete nothings (which he calls as *negatites*) arise in our attitude of questioning, and builds upon his own description of nothingness by first pointing to the limits faced by accounts given by Hegel and Heidegger and then moving on to his own detailed analysis of the concept. This paper will try to exposit these aspects of Sartre's conception of Nothingness and then I would try to bring out the relevance of this notion with respect to the way of life or existence by reflecting upon how the nothingness provides the basis for freedom and authentic living in human existence according to Sartre.

### **Nothingness and Act of Questioning**

According to Sartre, experiences of nothingness or absence are to be approached pre-reflectively, prior to any interpretation. When we have an immediate awareness of something not being there (perception of something missing) or an awareness of not doing something we could have done (regret etc.), there is a pre-reflective awareness of nothings (*negatites*) in these experiences. And apart from realization of joy or sadness at these experiences, primarily there is a perception of absence and this is what Sartre endeavours to explicate in his description of nothingness. He finds that it is in a specific form of human conduct that is, the attitude of questioning or inquiry that can reveal the nature of these experiences and also it is in this act of questioning, one can witness the origin of ‘real’ non-being, and not mere abstractions, within being. It would be seen how presence of non-being within being is not a logical contradiction but an existential necessity which defines the nature of being in this world.

For Sartre, a question is a human attitude, an act of consciousness, filled with meaning. Every question presupposes a being that questions and a being which is being questioned. So, even this inquiry that is there is a conduct that reveals man's relation

with the world is also an attitude, more than a mere sum of words or any psychological state, an attitude through which we expect a reply, a yes or no, a revelation of something or nothing even nothing would be a reply. And this admission to the possibility of a negative reply is admitting to the transcendent fact of non-existence of a conduct. This act of questioning, which presupposes a reply: a yes or no—a presence or absence, shows how both presence & absence are external to consciousness—but essentially related to it. If we shall consider concrete nothings as only external to consciousness and not related to it, concept of absence will be limited to negative judgements or statements existing in our mind. This is the usual objection to treating negation in the above manner as generally, negations as ‘absence’ merely refer to judgements and non-existent statements which exist only in our mind. But such a conception is ignorant of a proper understanding of negations as Sartre points out that many negations reveal a truth that could only be justified by recognizing non-being as an element of the real. At this juncture, Sartre recognizes two non-beings in every attitude of questioning viz. a) the expectation of the questioner which presupposes a certain nothing within the nature of knowledge, & b) possibility of a “real” non-being within being. A question then bridges gap between these two nothings by declaring the subject's expectation of a reply from non-being or being.

Sartre is basically inquiring into whether negative judgements are the foundation of our awareness of ‘nothingness’ or whether the concrete nothings within being provide the foundation of both negative judgements and the consequent general concept of nothingness. He makes two contentions with regards to the notion of nothingness— a) affirm that non-being does come to reality only through man, b) denies that non-being is a mere subjective abstraction, or merely psychological.

According to Sartre, an act of questioning is not explicit questions being asked but includes all human attitudes of expectation and all true expectations are about some disclosure or non-disclosure in being. The absence is due to an expectation, but this expectation is real and the relation it establishes with being is real. The empty chair is not a mere void. The entire room takes on a relation to this absence; the entire evening with all its activities is really modified by this absence. So, the concrete nothings arise within being only through the upsurge of consciousness. But it is important to note that these nothings while always being related essentially to man's consciousness continue within being independently of man's awareness of them. Non-being arises within being prior to and independent of man's knowledge of it—there is transphenomenality of non-being as

well as being i.e. non-being as well as being is not reducible to our awareness of non-being or being.<sup>1</sup> Non-being then haunts the being in the sense that it is never there, there as a void, but which constantly eludes being. And it is the attitude or act of questioning, which is an act of expectation, that non-being gets revealed in the structure of being.

Before describing, these nothings within the world and nothingness within human reality, Sartre first considers Hegel and Heidegger's approach to nothingness (in a way to show distinctiveness of his own position) which brings us to the next section of this paper.

### **Sartre's analysis of prior approaches to the notion of Nothingness**

In section third "The Dialectical Concept of Nothingness" of chapter one of his book, Sartre approaches the task of revealing man's original relation nothingness by examining Hegel's dialectical explanation of the relation of being to non-being.

Hegel's dialectic refers to a movement in which logic and reality develop and come-to-be. The movement is defined by three processes viz. thesis, antithesis, synthesis—the movement is from a positive quality(thesis) to explication of its negative aspect(antithesis)—resulting in resolution of these two in higher quality(synthesis). For Hegel, being is whatever is, nothingness is whatever is not and the latter gets submitted in the movement of the dialectic towards the being. However, this notion of non-being is simply an abstract negation of being, which adequately accounts for empty notions such as square circle but doesn't account for concrete nothing such as absence which is always the emptiness of something. For example, when we say—"Do not touch anything!" we mean anything in a particular room—the experience is not that of mere abstract negation but of a concrete nothing. Sartre points to the problem in Hegelian conception of non-being that being is not a meaning; concrete existent is not a meaning. The relation between being and nothingness is not on the level of meaning but on the level of existence. It is the existence being that gives non-being its efficacy.

In section fourth "Phenomenological Concept of Nothingness" of the same chapter, Sartre analyses Heidegger's notion of Nothingness. He considers Heidegger's conception an advance from Hegel's as it, being phenomenological, takes nothingness as a concrete phenomenon and not a mere abstract concept. Dasein, the human reality, experiences nothingness in the experience of anxiety. Yet,

Sartre still finds Heideggerian conception to be abstract as it explains nothingness as an emptiness which is one with itself and not truly within the being. It is again seen as inadequate to explain concrete negations. This brings us to the next section of the paper where I would try to elucidate Sartre's own description of the notion of Nothingness and would try to highlight its relevance with an authentic way of living.

### **Sartre's notion of Nothingness and its Existential Relevance:**

By way of analyzing how Sartre understands the attitude of questioning and his critique of both Hegelian and Heideggerian approach to the notion of nothingness, much of his own conception is reflected. In section fifth "The Origin of Nothingness", Sartre formulates his own description of nothingness which lays the foundation of the rest of the book.

Through the notion of nothingness, Sartre seeks to explain the relation of being with and in this world. Being-for-itself, which is human existence, in contrast to being-in-itself (objects and other entities in the world) questions its own being as consciousness of a pre-reflective cogito. Consciousness can question being because it has a certain distance from being and every question is an attitude towards being. Human reality's concrete nothingness is then consciousness which could not be pictured but understood if we ask the question—Who we are? This ability to question oneself is the sign of lack of identity with oneself. It is a sign of constant gliding sliding from perfect identity, a sliding that, for Sartre, is the nothingness within being. Concrete nothingness is thus the constant "elsewhere" of the consciousness.

As discussed before, this understanding of nothingness results from the questioning of the nature of being. As the foundation for inquiry and negations, nothingness must always be in question, for otherwise it would have the stability and self-identity of a being-in-itself.<sup>2</sup> This certain ontological distance reflected in the lack or absence of identity is needed for the subject to know its object i.e. the being. In questioning, the questioner negates its continuity with itself from its being, nihilating being in relations to other aspects of being. This nihilation within one's being represents the upsurge of nothingness within one's consciousness. The being-for-itself is a region of being in which everything is in question, even the very fact of its own nothingness. Man is a unique being which is never one with itself. It is only in being, that real non-being comes into existence. Being-for-itself can nihilate because its brute existence or factual necessity is already nihilated

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<sup>1</sup>Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness"*, p.57

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.65

whereas a being-in-itself cannot nihilate because it is what it is. Nothingness is thus not to be understood as an independent void or emptiness within but rather it is brought to be by the being-for-itself which is in search of its identity. This phenomenon thus resonates how existence-precedes-essence and this is how precisely nothingness can be seen as becoming the site for human freedom.

For Sartre, our free actions are the sole origin of each person's distinctive characteristics. It is in the act of questioning, doubt, reflection that man can break from the series of existence as a causal series and in these absences, man's possibilities of becoming what he is not are revealed. Nothingness is not a mere void but is actually being in question of itself. Freedom as nothingness is then the very nature of consciousness but this does not imply that there is a constant awareness of freedom. Nothingness as part of one's nature is most fundamental but least apparent. Sartre thus insists that consciousness, nothingness, freedom must themselves constantly be in question lest they collapse into an identity with themselves and become an opaque, thick, fixed in-itself.

We never directly face nothingness as a thing. It is rather the nature of consciousness that allows itself to question its own self always. Consequently, there is always a possibility of being aware of this nothingness and hence freedom or to be avoid this awareness. There is a possibility of an upsurge of consciousness in freedom driven by ontological nothingness but consciousness tries to flee this possibility and take refuge in convenient inauthentic living. Nothingness could then be understood as a kind of a self-activity which keeps in existence the possibility of questioning our existence thereby creating a site of freedom-to-be what we may want to be. This presence of concrete non-being within our being is thus which creates the foundation of infinite possibilities for the being-for-itself and the ignorance of which makes us lie to ourselves and reduce our existence to mere factual necessity which otherwise is a part and not whole of our existence.

Making choices and acting on those choices might count as my being free. But, for my choices to be free, it is required that those choices are truly my choices. Furthermore, for my choices to be truly mine, my choices must reflect my true self. So it seems that choosing and acting freely in a sturdy sense depends on such choosing and acting being authentic. Very often, such authentic choosing, acting and living are not the case. In the complexities of our lives, we find ourselves to be not entirely free or free with respect to all matters. We are confronted with aspects of our existence

which are given and immutable. It presents us with the twin character of our existence: freedom and givenness or transcendence and facticity (in Sartre's terminology). Transcendence consists in our capacity to negate or to question the way things are, including our existence or to envision the way things are not, but might be and to act on that knowledge. It is the capacity to discern possibilities. It accounts for our freedom. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes this feature as "being-ahead-of-itself", he writes: "Dasein is always 'beyond itself' not as a way of behaving towards other entities which it is not, but as Being towards the potentiality-for-Being which it is itself." Sartre captures this idea by saying that we are what we are not and we are not what we are. In other words, unlike things such as rocks and books which are fully identical with themselves, human beings are not identical with themselves. That is, we are not (only) what we are, i.e. the sum-total of our past and present attributes but we are (also) what we are not (yet), i.e. the sum-total of our future possibilities.

Human beings have factual attributes that are fixed. These attributes are beyond our capacity to be controlled. This is our facticity. The term is adopted from Heidegger. Heidegger uses facticity to refer to our thrownness, i.e. the fact that we find ourselves existing without having chosen to do so. Unlike, Heidegger's use of the term, Sartre uses facticity to refer not just to the fact that we have been thrown into this world, but also to how we have been thrown, as middle-class, male, of small height—i.e., it refers to all those things about us that we have not chosen or can no longer choose against. In Sartre's conception of facticity, one can find at least three salient types of factual attributes. One type of attribute of human beings is their pasts. I am always, in part, what I and my situations have been. I can no longer change what has led up to the present, regardless of whether my past activities were chosen by me or not. A second factual feature is a person's body. We are not fully transcendent but are embodied or "an inert presence as a passive object among other objects." While we may, up to a point, change certain things about our bodies, our bodies still constrain our future choices. For example, an accident might change my body or I might get a tattoo. But, our body still determines those changes and the body also is responsible for constrains in our future choices. I cannot cut my wings because I don't have them and I cannot become a pilot if I am blind. Third, there is the way that others view us or, what Sartre calls, our "being-for-others". For Sartre, the way others regard us is not altogether separate from us, but constitutes, in part, who we are. While we have some limited influence on the way others view us, our "being-for-others"

continues to constrain our future course of action. For example, I am constantly making strategies and try to act according to them with the hope to improve, change or maintain the way others view of me. In denying to be bothered by what others see in me, I still am aware of others and maintaining my lack of concern about the views of others. Perhaps, I want be seen as someone who is not bothered about the others. So, according to Sartre, human beings are composed of two aspects: on the one hand, their freedom to surpass what is and on the other hand, the factual constraints on their freedom which derive from their past, their bodies and their image in the eyes of others.

According to Sartre, our freedom results in self-deception. Very often, we find ourselves to be deceiving ourselves. But, what makes it possible and tempting for us to deceive ourselves? It is our freedom. It is a source of comfort as well as anxiety and it is a source of an enormous burden. Bad faith is a form of self-deception. It is an attempt to avoid our freedom by lying to ourselves. It is essentially built on facticity and transcendence. He explains bad faith in this way:

The basic concept which is thus engendered utilizes the double property of the human being, who is at once a facticity and a transcendence. These two aspects of human reality are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination. But bad faith does not wish either to coordinate them or to surmount them in a synthesis. Bad faith seeks to affirm facticity as being transcendence and transcendence as being facticity...

In other words, our freedom or transcendence is about what is up to us. Our facticity refers to what is beyond our control. The phenomenon of bad faith conflates one with the other, either by regarding what is transcendent as factual or what is factual as transcendent. It is worth noting that bad faith as described by Sartre is not an uncommon occurrence. We often do deny or overlook the fact we are not truly trapped by circumstances but are indeed much more free than we are inclined to believe and more responsible for our lives than we might like to admit. We often deny or fail to appreciate that many of the unpleasant things in our lives are simply beyond our control. Sartre's account of bad faith would be best appreciated by means of examples. Here, I would be discussing two examples: the homosexual who denies that his past homosexual acts (to which he admits) define his present sexual identity and the café waiter who fully identifies himself with his job that he effectively denies his full humanity or he is anything other than a waiter. In both the examples, one is not true to oneself.

Furthermore, Sartre argues that bad faith is absolutely unavoidable. In his example of a man who denies that he is truly a homosexual despite consistent homosexual acts in the past to which he admits. Sartre says he is in bad faith as he is not true to himself. Here, Sartre also talks of a friend of that homosexual man; he calls this friend "the champion of sincerity". He urges the homosexual man to admit that he is what he has been. Sartre maintains that the homosexual man is in bad faith because the relevance of his factual attributes, i.e. his past behavior, to his present sexual identity. But Sartre goes on to argue that the champion of sincerity is no less guilty of bad faith since he demands that the homosexual identify wholly with his factual past to and ignore his transcendent capacity to be other than what he has been. More generally, Sartre's point is that any attempt to escape bad faith by owning up to what one is falls back into bad faith by failing to acknowledge that one is (also) what one is not (yet) but might be. Having good faith does not let us escape bad faith. In other words, sincerity and good faith fail to honor a nature of human beings that they are not what they are and are what they are not. This inescapability of bad faith makes it very difficult to understand how human beings might ever attain anything approaching an authentic existence. But, he also does not deny the possibility of approaching authenticity and which he describes authenticity as a kind of "self-recovery (reprise) of being which was previously corrupted" in an enigmatic footnote.

Sartre claims that sincerity and good faith always fall back to bad faith. We necessarily conflate ourselves with what we were and we are. He says that we fail to acknowledge what one is not (yet) but might be. In doing so, we identify ourselves solely in terms of our actual attributes, but not in terms of our possibilities. The question is if one properly distinguishes between what is up to us and what is not up to us by means of an honest appraisal of the available evidence, if a person avoids denying her factual attributes or her ability to discern and act on possibilities, could she, in principle, stay out of bad faith? Regarding the possible, it is something we do not know (yet). How would one identify himself with something that is unknown? It should be recognized that the future is not something which we expect would come, the routine which we follow or the imagined. In the true sense our future is not expectation of something expected and known, it is expectation of unexpected. Here, our expectation is directed towards something but that something is unexpected. It is about something unknown, unexpected and never imagined or thought of. Yet, one might be open to the possibilities and treats them as unknown and unexpected, but one cannot

identify them with things that are not there (yet) as they cannot be conceived. One can only identify oneself with potentiality per se and not as potentiality to be this or that.

In his example of the café waiter, Sartre provides a delightful description of the waiter. He writes:

His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes forward toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally, there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand.

The waiter's behavior seems to us as a game. He is playing at being a waiter. His gestures and his voice seem to be mechanism to be a waiter. He seriously identifies himself as a waiter. In this identification he is in bad faith. Furthermore, Sartre says that if he were to play at being waiter in this manner, he would be acting as if he is not the one who bestows value and obligation. Sartre writes: "from the very fact that I sustain this role in existence I did not transcend it on every side, as if I did not constitute myself as one beyond my condition." The point is that the waiter is trying to realize his group identity, the identity associated with waiters, as if it were his very essence. To use Sartre's language, he is trying to flatten himself into a thing. But, human are not thing-like; they are individually distinct from one another and irrevocably free. Any attempt to understand oneself, wholly or perhaps even partly, in terms of an identity of a group would constitute a denial of one's transcendence and an act of bad faith. It is to be inauthentic.

An obvious question arises. Is it possible for someone to identify himself as something without falling into bad faith? I can affirm my identity as a student of philosophy by taking into account my past choices and activities and my present attachments to work, colleagues and lifestyle. At the same time I do acknowledge that I am and have always been more than a student of philosophy and that my life need in no way, nor can it, follow a script written for a generic person with my profession. That is, I always exceed my professional role. And, I know this. But, I am also aligning myself with or committing myself to certain habits, pleasures, values and objectives as I gain my sense of self from belonging to a profession or group. And in doing so I am

foreclosing other options and thus limiting the full range of free acts that I might undertake. In other words, to identify oneself with a group is to say "here I stand." It is to trade a piece of one's transcendence for a piece of commitment to some mode of being. In this sense, the relation between transcendence and facticity is a game: if I have more of one, then I have less of the other. Here, we can conceive bad faith as not simply the problem of conflating one's factual attributes with one's transcendent attributes and vice versa, but as adopting an attribute as factual, which means taking something away from one's transcendence. And, not adopting any attribute would mean not being or doing anything at all. It would mean giving up one's very existence as a creature with values, projects, and goals. The tension between facticity and transcendence is inescapable and so is bad faith.

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